

OLIVER BUILDING

159 North Dearborn Street

PRELIMINARY SUMMARY OF INFORMATION
Originally submitted to the
Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks
in July, 1974
Revised November, 1982

From *North Loop Guidelines for Conservation and Redevelopment*, approved by the City Council of Chicago in October, 1981:

The North Loop Redevelopment Project is one of the largest renewal projects of its kind proposed for any city in the United States. . . .

The North Loop has been studied as a potential renewal area for more than a decade. It was identified in 1973 by the Chicago Central Area Committee in the Chicago 21 Plan as a part of the Central Business District in which major redevelopment could and should be initiated. . . .

Several of the existing structures within the project area are likely to be designated as official City of Chicago landmarks by the Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks. The Commission, together with the Department of Planning, will develop the standards to be used as the basis for the review of rehabilitation or reuse potential for these or other structures to be retained. . . .

The subject building is one of those currently under consideration by the Landmarks Commission for possible recommendation to the City Council for official landmark designation.

OLIVER BUILDING

159 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, Illinois

Architects: Holabird and Roche

Constructed: 1906-07
Addition: Holabird and Roche; 1920

The Oliver Building was designed by one of Chicago's most notable architectural firms: Holabird and Roche. This successful and prolific partnership was responsible for seventy-two commercial buildings in downtown Chicago from its founding in 1883 until the firm became Holabird and Root in 1928. From the inception of their practice, the designs of Holabird and Roche were distinguished by the application of the most modern technological approaches, a scrupulous attention to detail, and a concern and respect for the present and future needs of the client.

The Client

As clearly revealed in the decorative detail of the facade, the Oliver Building was constructed to house the administrative headquarters of the Oliver Typewriting Company, manufacturers of the Oliver Typewriter. Along with Bell and Watson's "magical toy," the telephone (invented in 1872), the typewriter was one of the great transforming factors of modern business practice. The first practical typewriter was invented by an American, Christopher Latham Sholes, and in 1873, he signed a contract with R. Remington and Sons, gunsmiths, of Illion, New York, for its manufacture. The first typewriters were placed on the market in 1874 and the machine was named the Remington. Mark Twain purchased a Remington and became the first author to submit a typewritten book manuscript.

Organized in 1896, the Oliver Typewriting Company originally occupied one room in the Atwood Building on Clark Street. Within a decade, not only was it prosperous enough to enjoy its own downtown office building, but its factory in Woodstock,

Illinois, had expanded to ten acres. The firm remained on Dearborn Street until the end of its existence in 1940. In 1931, *Notable Men of Illinois and Their State* featured a full-page photograph of the new building and this description:

This is truly an Illinois product and its phenomenal growth, its popularity and worth are easily estimated. Hundreds of thousands of Oliver typewriters are in daily use throughout the civilized world. The officers are men of prominence, force, and ability.

By this date, branch offices of the Oliver Typewriting Company had been established in six major American cities as well as London, England, and the Oliver Typewriter had been the recipient of numerous gold medals and awards. The primacy of the Oliver Typewriter was due to the fact that the company promoted it as "the practical, as well as the original, solution of the visible-writing problem—a problem that baffled inventors for over thirty years after the blind typewriters made their appearance." In other words, with the Oliver typewriter every character was right side up and in plain sight as soon as it was printed. For its day, the Oliver Typewriter was one of the most advanced and superior machines on the market.

The Architects

According to architectural historian Carl Condit, the architecture of Holabird and Roche, "most completely represented the purpose and achievement of the mainstream of the Chicago school." In the 1880s, the firm worked out simple and utilitarian solutions to the problems of the large urban office building. From these solutions, they were able to devise a standardized form for the urban office building, a form which they applied with minor variations to their work through the 1920s. The original principles of the Chicago school survived longer in their work than in that of any other architect or firm.

Neither William Holabird nor Martin Roche was a native Chicagoan. Holabird, born in New York state in 1854 and educated at West Point, came to Chicago in 1875. Roche was born in Ohio in 1855 and came to Chicago in his youth. In 1880, Holabird formed his own firm with Ossian Simonds and, in 1881, they were joined by Roche. In 1883, Simonds left to specialize in landscape architecture, and the firm of Holabird and Roche was founded.

Both Holabird and Roche had been trained in the office of William LeBaron Jenney. Jenney was one of the pioneers in the development of skeletal construction. This construction method employs a metal frame, or skeleton, to support the weight of the building, freeing its exterior walls from their bearing function. Holabird and Roche were instrumental in perfecting the aesthetic expression of the skeletal steel frame office building. Their designs displayed the central characteristics of what has come to be called the Chicago school of architecture. The supporting frame, sheathed in brick

and/or terra cotta, is reflected on the facade of the building. Wide Chicago windows (consisting of a stationary center pane flanked by double-hung windows) fill the entire bay. Spandrels are recessed and the piers are continuous which creates a cellular elevation. Buildings such as Holabird and Roche's 1894 Marquette Building (designated a Chicago Landmark on June 9, 1975) exemplify the design principles formulated and refined by Chicago school architects.

The Oliver Building

The Oliver Building is a shallow and relatively narrow building, originally only five stories high. The ground floors of the building contained shops with large display windows. The three office floors above were separated from the top story by a string course and the building was topped by a cornice. In 1920, the cornice was removed and two additional stories were added. Holabird and Roche were the architects for the addition as well and they continued the basic design of the lower floors in the upper two. The only evidence of the two stages of construction is the difference in the color and texture of the brick at the sixth and seventh floors.

The frame of the building is a simple steel skeleton. Above the first floor the frame is sheathed in brick and the bays are filled with prefabricated cast-iron window units. This frame-and-infill construction is clearly and lucidly handled and is, according to architectural historian C.W. Westfall, "suggestive of modern practice." He explains:

This is the closest approach by any early Chicago architect to the Bauhaus style that would be translated into Chicago school terms by Mies van der Rohe, for example at 860-880 Lake Shore Drive, where the aluminum window units are set into a black painted steel frame.

The particularly striking aspect of the Oliver Building is the cast-iron ornament which surrounds each window, and is especially rich at the main entrance. Since the 1850s, cast iron had been successfully used as a building material. By the early 1900s, however, its use was almost exclusively decorative. James Bogardus, who is credited as the first architect to design a completely cast-iron building, published this explanation of the merits of cast-iron in 1856:

Another recommendation of cast-iron is its happy adaptability to ornament and decoration. Were a single ornament only required, it might perhaps be executed as cheaply in marble or freestone: but where a multiplicity of the same is needed, they can be cast in iron at an expense not to be named in comparison, even with that of wood; and with this advantage, that they will retain their original fullness and sharpness of outline long after those in stone have decayed and disappeared. Fluted columns and Corinthian capitals, the most elaborate carvings, and the richest designs, which the architect may have dreamed

of, but did not dare represent in his plans, may thus be reproduced for little more than the cost of ordinary castings.

The ornament is judiciously placed, enhancing the visual interest of the facade without detracting from the essential simplicity of the overall design. The ornament further serves as a vehicle that discreetly advertises the client and his business, as illustrated in the treatment of the window spandrels. Here a center panel is embossed with the name of the company. Flanking this are panels with a circle in which is set a replica of the Oliver Typewriter. The circles are decorated with the curvilinear forms of porpoises, a motif derived from the Renaissance, as are the other forms of ram's heads, half-shells, and foliage which are incorporated into the highly sculptured forms used throughout. The early Chicago school buildings of the 1880s and 1890s have achieved recognition because they were innovative in not resorting to the precedent of historical styles. By the turn of the century, however, due to the influential classicism of the World's Columbian Exposition of 1893, architects were again confidently assimilating architectural elements of the past into their designs.

The Oliver well represents the design principles of the Chicago school. The facade clearly and directly reveals the character of the steel frame that supports the building. The Oliver Building also has significance as a fine example of the work of two distinguished Chicago school architects, William Holabird and Martin Roche. About their work, architectural historian Robert Brueggemann has written:

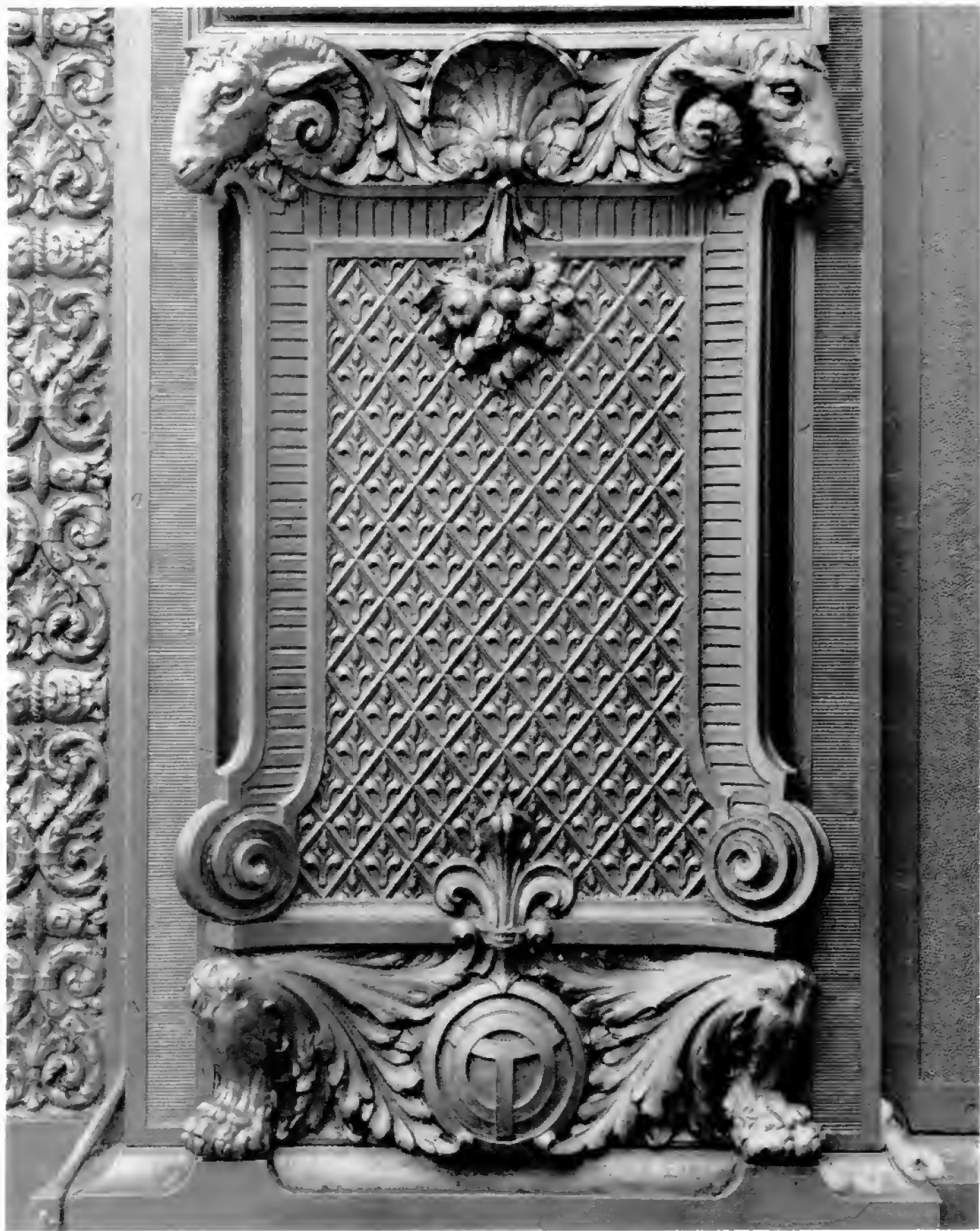
Worth noting is the large number of H&R buildings that are still standing, even though some serve purposes other than those for which they were designed. . . The combination of quality and conservatism of H&R designs has assured its buildings long life.

Although not one of their larger commissions, the Oliver Building exemplifies the same high caliber of design that characterized Holabird and Roche's work. Today the Oliver Building continues to be viable as a contributing factor of Chicago's North Loop streetscape.

OPPOSITE:

Handsomely detailed cast-iron ornament surrounds the entrance of the Oliver Building.

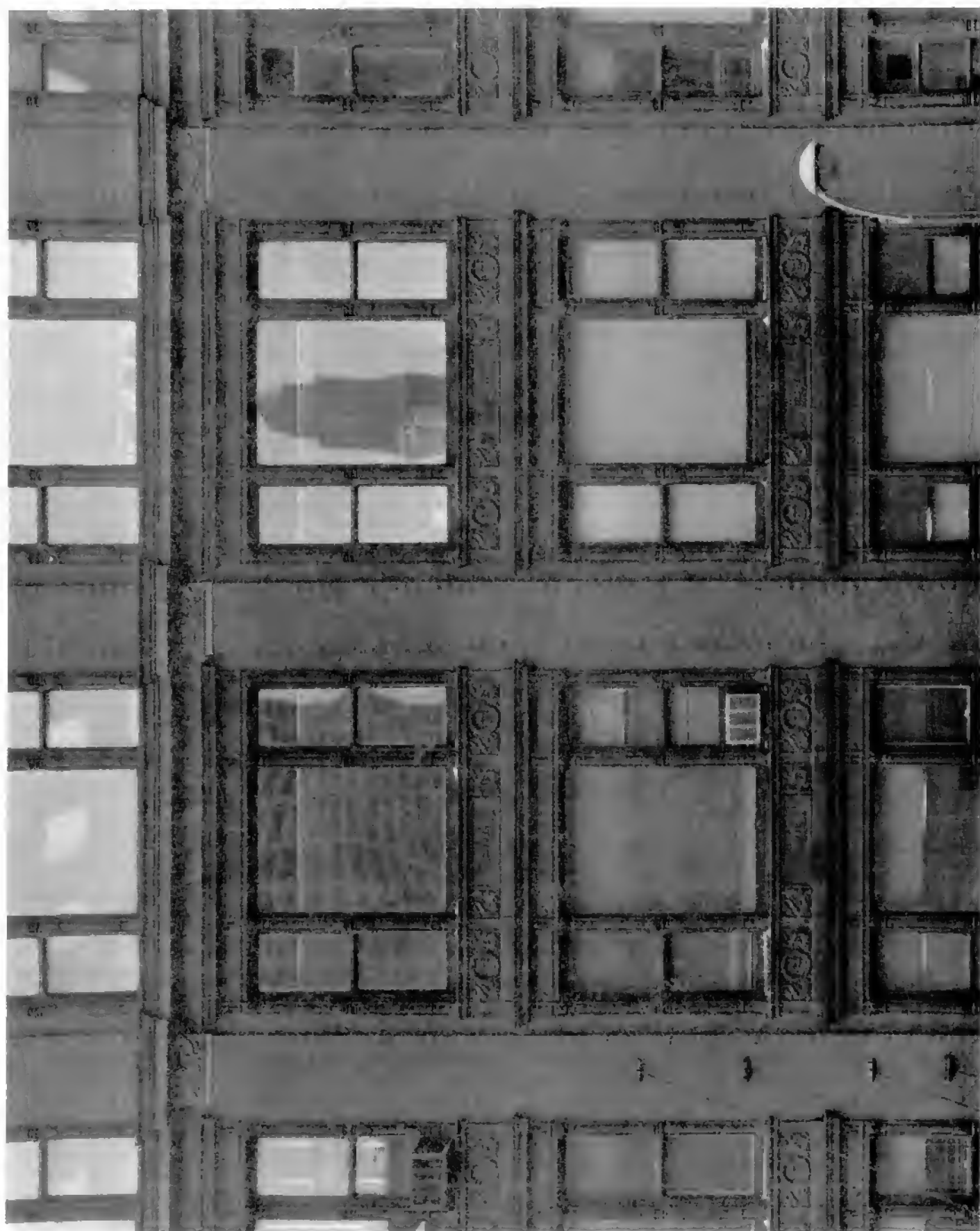
(Stephen Beal, photographer)



OPPOSITE:

The basic simplicity of the overall design is apparent in the facade elevation.

(Stephen Beal, photographer)



The Commission on Chicago Historical and Architectural Landmarks was established in 1968 by city ordinance, and was given the responsibility of recommending to the City Council that specific landmarks be preserved and protected by law. The ordinance states that the Commission, whose nine members are appointed by the Mayor, can recommend any area, building, structure, work of art, or other object that has sufficient historical, community, or aesthetic value. Once the City Council acts on the Commission's recommendation and designates a Chicago Landmark, the ordinance provides for the preservation, protection, enhancement, rehabilitation, and perpetuation of that landmark. The Commission assists by carefully reviewing all applications for building permits pertaining to the designated Chicago Landmarks. This insures that any proposed alteration does not detract from the qualities that caused the landmark to be designated.

The Commission makes its recommendations to the City Council only after extensive study. This preliminary summary of information has been prepared by the Commission staff and was submitted to the Commission when it initiated consideration of the historical and architectural qualities of this potential landmark.



CITY OF CHICAGO

Jane M. Byrne, Mayor

**COMMISSION ON CHICAGO HISTORICAL
AND ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARKS**

Ira J. Bach, Chairman

Ruth Moore Garbe, Vice-Chairman

Joseph Benson, Secretary

John W. Baird

Jerome R. Butler, Jr.

William M. Drake, Jr.

John A. Holabird

Martin R. Murphy

(represented by Stephen Roman)

William M. McLenahan, Director

Room 800

320 North Clark Street

Chicago, Illinois 60610

(312) 744-3200